DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 131 700 FL 008 160

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TITLE Significance of the Threshold-Level in the Early Teaching of Modern Languages. Council of Europe: Symposium on Modern Languages in Primary Education (Bakkerne, Holte [near Copenhagen], 20-25 September 1976).
INSTITUTION Council of Europe, Strasbourg (France). Committee for General and Technical Education.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 13p.; For related documents, see FL 008 158 and FL 008 159

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Articulation (Program); Educational Needs; *Educational Objectives; Educational Planning; *Elementary Secondary Education; Fles Programs; *Language Instruction; *Language Learning Levels; Language Proficiency; Language Skills; Modern Languages; *Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS Eupore; *Threshold Level (Language)

ABSTRACT

It is maintained that if foreign language learning is included at the elementary school level, it should be done to make it possible for the large majority of the pupils to reach a certain minimum objective in secondary education. And, elementary schools must reach one common objective which is closely related to the minimum objective of secondary education. It follows that secondary schools should fully accept and recognize what has been achieved in the primary schools and start teaching at the point where the elementary schools stopped. It is reported that a minimum objective for secondary education has been developed and approved in a meeting of delegates from a dozen European countries. This objective, the "Threshold Level," is a systematic description of what is involved in using a language for general communication purposes. It is proposed that the Threshold Level could form the basis for the definition of an objective for the early teaching of modern languages. (Author/SW)

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ED131700

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg 18 August 1976 DECS/EGT (76) 45

COMMITTEE FOR GENERAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Symposium on

"Modern Languages in Primary Education"
"Bakkerne", Holte (near Copenhagen)

20-25 September 1976

"SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THRESHOLD-LEVEL IN THE EARLY TEACHING OF MODERN LANGUAGES"

by

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We have gradually made our society such a complex structure that the mind boggles at the magnitude of the task confronting a child when it has to find its way in this society and to become an active participant in its further development. For this is the essence of democracy that each member of the community should undertake responsibility for the affairs of this community. In order to prepare it for this role we provide the child with an education, that is we make it undergo a huge number of planned and organized experiences which, in the end, are expected to enable it to function as a responsible member of our society. In the course of this process we expect the child to master a stupendous amount of facts, to develop powers of reasoning, of systematically organizing data and drawing justifiable inferences, we expect it to internalize the moral rules of our society, to acquire all sorts of physical skills, and, last but not least, to gain insight into its own unique potential as an individual and to learn how to exploit this as fully as possible. For all this we set aside a period of some 8 to 14 years. For the large majority of children in our European community this period of organized education is unlikely to exceed 10 years and may even be shorter.

As educators, then, we have a huge responsibility. We are responsible for planning and structuring the educational experiences of the prospective members of our society in such a way that in the few years available for this purpose the child is adequately prepared to take its place in this society. This means that we cannot take risks, that we cannot afford to gamble with the time of our children in experiments which may turn out to be counter-productive for the children involved, that we cannot afford to obey whims, whether educational or political. Failure to be as efficient as we possibly can is inexcusable. Curiously enough, our laws provide penalties for the theft of property, not for the theft of irreplaceable time.

By now some of you may be feeling that I am indulging in rhetorical exaggeration. I assure you that such has not been

my intention. For many of the countries represented here this symposium will provide a challenge. It may give fresh impetus to ongoing experimentation and it may lead to new attempts at educational innovation. Since I have been given the honour to present the first general lecture at this symposium I felt obliged to leave no doubt as to the seriousness of our undertaking by reminding you of the context in which we are working. Unless we are prepared to recognize and accept the constraints imposed on us by this context it would be in the interest of our school-children if we all packed up straightaway and went home.

Let me give you some of the reasons for my concern. In one of our countries a new socially oriented subject was introduced in secondary education some 8 years ago. At the time of its introduction the objectives were vague and no curriculum or syllabus had been constructed. Not even the teachers had been specifically trained for it. Yet, it was confidently expected that matters would somehow take care of themselves, that a sort of crystallization would take place, and that in a few years' time the new subject would have assumed a concrete and recognizable shape among the established school-subjects. Of course, spectres seldom clothe themselves in flesh and blood, and even if they do so in storybooks such creatures of ghostly origin are rarely as benevolent as their creators would have thought. Needless to say the case I referred to went the same way and the children are the victims because they are still wasting their time in efforts which have little more justification than the individual teacher's whims. Another example is even more pertinent. In a certain region in a certain country a foreign language was taught to young children in primary schools. It was an interesting experiment, all the participants had lots of fun and some interesting reports were published and found their way into numerous libraries and archives. Unfortunately, when the children moved on to secondary education they did not fit into the current foreign language programme any more, so teachers in their new schools told them to forget what they had done before and to start from scratch with proper grown-up methods.

This sort of experimentation I would not hesitate to call irresponsible. It is experimentation in which the experimenters have failed to take all the steps necessary to ensure that the children would not be the worse for it. It is our duty to see to it that we do not encourage such abuse of educational power. In the rest of my lecture I shall deal with one of the precautions we can take in order to ensure that the early learning of a modern language is worth the time and effort of all those involved, particularly the school-children.

In some of our countries a foreign language is a well-established subject in primary education. — It may be necessary to point out here that I shall use the term primary education to refer to the education provided during the period we usually call childhood and secondary education for the period of adolescence. I am aware that the distinction is not formally made in the same way in all the countries represented here, but on the whole there is some kind of transition at the age of 11 to 13. I should also point out that my further remarks apply particularly to the situation in monolingual countries, although my proposals will not be without relevance to countries with more than one national language, provided certain adjustments are made.— In some of our countries, then, a foreign language is already part of primary school curricula. In many countries, however, this is by no means generally the case. Yet, I would suppose that in all of these the idea of introducing a foreign language in primary education is being discussed, if it has not, in principle, already been accepted. In these discussions arguments in favour of this introduction abound. "It is important that young children should broaden their outlook upon the world — through a foreign language." A noble argument, but what about their outlook upon their own environment? What about their ability in their mother-tongue? Can we really afford the time for a foreign language at an early age — assuming that it can be taught later as well — as long as we find that most adolescents cannot adequately express themselves orally in their mother-tongue and make ghastly mistakes in spelling when they try to write it?

"The younger children are, the more easily and the more perfectly they learn a foreign language." A time-honoured argument mainly based on experiences with migrants. Our school-children, however, are not migrants; it has by no means been incontroversially established that young school-children do learn a foreign language better and faster than their older colleagues, except, perhaps, the pronunciation, and why should that have to be absolutely perfect anyway? I do not think it will be necessary to go through the whole list of arguments: they are only too familiar. All of them may be easily refuted by asking the proponents what they would sacrifice from current primary school curricula so as to find time for a foreign language and by inviting them to explain why the foreign language is more important than whatever they would sacrifice for it.

So far I have come across only one argument, in fact, which cannot be easily dismissed and which is even strong enough to entitle foreign language teaching to at least an equal claim on the young learner's time and energy as any other school-subject. This is the argument that in a society where the ability to use at least one foreign language is considered to be indispensable and where compulsory secondary education does not have enough time available to guarantee the acquisition of this ability, it is necessary to start already in primary education so that the large majority of the children will reach at least a minimum objective before school-leaving age. Of course, this argument carries all the more weight in those countries where there is a strong need for the ability to use more than one foreign language. Where during the compulsory school-period minimally acceptable levels will have to be reached in, say, two languages, it may be absolutely necessary to start with one at a very early age in order to find time enough for the second one later.

If this is the one conclusive argument, however, — and, as I have indicated, I believe it is — it follows that foreign language learning in primary schools cannot be considered independently from foreign language learning in secondary education. It follows that foreign language teaching must be planned

as one ongoing activity which cuts right across the boundary line between primary and secondary education. If a foreign language is introduced in primary schools mainly or only because this will enable secondary schools to reach certain minimum objectives it follows that in primary schools, as well, teaching must already be geared towards these objectives. It also follows that secondary education must fully accept and recognize what has been achieved in the primary schools and start teaching right at the point where the primary schools stopped. Unless these conditions are fulfilled foreign language teaching in primary schools is a waste of the children's time and ought to be prevented. If we accept this necessity for longitudinal planning we accept a very strong constraint on our freedom of action. In most countries the transition from primary education to secondary education is marked by a general regrouping of the children. Children from one single primary school may move to several different secondary schools. This means that, if foreign language programmes are to continue right across this boundary line, all primary schools must take their pupils up to one and the same point in the programme and that all secondary schools must start from this point. In experimental conditions we may have to content ourselves with satisfying this requirement for, say, 80 per cent of the children involved. In a large-scale introduction of foreign language learning in primary education, however, nothing short of 100 per cent is acceptable, unless, of course, we have a differentiated programme right from the start. In that case, however, a multiple interlinking will have to established of such complexity that the feasibility is doubtful.

Let us now pause for a moment to take stock of the conclusions we have reached. First, if foreign language learning is to be included in primary school curricula it is in order to make it possible for the large majority of the pupils to reach at least a worthwhile minimum objective in secondary education. Secondly, primary schools must reach one common objective which is closely related to and even subsumed in the minimum objective of secondary education.

A minimum objective for secondary education has meanwhile been developed and was recently approved in a meeting in Strasbourg by delegates from a dozen European countries. In various countries experimentation with this objective is being planned or even in progress. In certain countries it is actually being incorporated into the curricula. I am referring, of course, to the so-called Threshold-Level. The Threshold-Level is a highly explicit and detailed statement of what it means – and now I quote – "to be able to survive, linguistically speaking, in temporary contacts with foreign language speakers in everyday situations, whether as visitors to the foreign country or with visitors to one's own country, and to establish and maintain social contacts". Once this general description of the objective is accepted one again accepts further constraints on one's teaching programme. A learner cannot do what is stated in the general description unless he has learned to do such things as giving information, inquiring, affirming, denying, expressing certainty, expressing doubt, referring to past, present and future, expressing relationships in time and place, etc., etc., etc. Trying to learn a language without learning these things is like trying to learn mathematics without learning how to add, subtract, multiply and divide. This has always been the case and it is not changed by the publication of the Threshold-Level. The difference this document makes is that for the first time we now have a systematic description of just what is involved in using a language for general communication purposes. If this description is having an impact on foreign language programmes it is because it is felt that it will significantly increase the efficiency of these programmes.

A major component of the Threshold-Level is the specification of the language-functions the learners will have to be able to fulfil and the notions they will have to be able to express. To give one example: "inquiring about the availability of chocolate" presupposes the ability to perform the language-function of 'inquiring', and to express the notions of 'availability' and of 'chocolate'. The former notion, availability, is a 'general notion', i.e. it might be needed in a large variety of situations, whatever the topic of communication. 'Chocolate', however, would seem to be

particularly relevant when the topic 'food or drink' is being dealt with. Such a notion we call a 'specific notion'. Whereas the functions and the general notions are indispensable for all learners – they form, as it were, the hard core of communicative ability – the choice of specific notions allows of much more variety. Which specific notions are particularly required depends on the likelihood of certain topics being dealt with and this, in turn, is related to the special needs and interests of individual learners. Even here, however, there are certain topics which invariably come in for a high priority rating. Topics such as 'personal identification' – saying who one is, where one lives, stating one's age, origin, nationality, etc., etc. – and 'finding one's way' are likely to appeal to all learners who wish to reach the general objective I have described. Certain other topics, however, may be regarded as negotiable or interchangeable. It does not really affect one's general level of communicative ability whether one can express doubt with regard to the availability of a dictionary (topic: language) or of petrol (topic: private transport - services). The Threshold-Level, then, attempts to fix that which is fundamentally required for everyday communication purposes and to propose optional elements for subjects or topics which are more dependent on individual circumstances. It thus combines a certain amount of uniformity, required for any form of organized large-scale education, with a degree of flexibility, of adaptability, which is required for personalized, learner-oriented teaching.
As described so far, the Threshold-Level is non-language-specific: I have only referred to the ability to fulfil certain language-functions and to express certain notions. How they are to be fulfilled and expressed will have to be determined for each language separately. In the Threshold-Level it has been attempted to select for each function and for each notion those linguistic realizations, or exponents, which, together, would enable the learner to function adequately in the foreign language whilst constituting the smallest possible learning-load. 'Adequate functioning', it should be emphasized, is not, in our view, the ability to communicate in an artificial, lifeless, repetitive or formulaic sort of language. 'Adequate functioning' implies a certain range of expression and a structural versatility which, if still strictly limited, make the

learner an intellectually and socially acceptable partner in foreign language communication. This means that the choice of exponents at Threshold-Level combines a certain natural richness with a high degree of economy. If in French the potential exponents of the language-function 'asking permission' range from "Je peux m'en aller?" to "Verriez-vous un inconvénient à ce que je m'en vais ?" we would certainly retain "Je peux m'en aller?", but probably include as well "Pourrais-je m'en aller?" and "J'aimerais bien m'en aller" and perhaps one or two more.

The Threshold-Level, then, is an objective specifying that kind of foreign language ability which most of us, it would seem, regard as the most essentially needed ability in our modern society. It does not exclude the acquisition of further ability of different kinds, indeed, most users might feel that at least a component for reading and writing beyond what has been specified should be added, but, on the contrary, it will constitute a sound basis for further learning.

If it is agreed that this objective is what all children should be given a chance to reach in the course of their compulsory schooling, we may now consider the question how an intermediate objective for foreign language learning in primary education may be derived from it. For this is just what we have to do if we take the need for longitudinal planning seriously. The intermediate objective must fall entirely within the specifications of the ulterior objective, in this case the Threshold-Level. It will, in fact, have to be arrived at by means of a principled selection from the Threshold-Level content.

What principles should be applied in making this selection? The first principle, I would suggest, would be that the widest functional range should be achieved as early as possible. Even the most naïve learners start a foreign language course with the expectation that it will enable them to do things in the foreign language, particularly to do those things which they feel they may want to do when in contact with foreign language speakers. In order to sustain their motivation we shall consequently have to plan

their foreign language course in such a way that they can do as many of these things as possible as early as possible. To give a simple example: rather than teaching them from the start to introduce themselves in three different ways, we would prefer them to be able to do three different things each in one way. The range of expression required for fully adequate foreign language behaviour will be reached gradually. In our example this means that we would come back to 'introducing oneself' at a later stage in order to teach the other two ways of doing it. This 'recycling' is, of course, not only a grading-principle below Threshold-Level, it applies equally above it. Our second principle of selection will be the old principle of increasing complexity. The language-forms chosen for the first stage will, on the whole, be the simpler ones. "Perhaps he is ill" rather than "He may be ill", to give one example. The third principle is that of immediate relevance. We cannot teach everything at the same time, we cannot deal with all the topics simultaneously. A selection will therefore have to be made of those topics which are likely to appeal most directly to the children. I do not mean by this amusing them at all costs by offering them a diet of pop-songs and groovy themes, which will bore them to tears anyway after a few weeks, but dealing with those matters which they themselves may feel they will need to be able to deal with when using a foreign language. The fourth principle is that of pedagogical adequacy. The selection we make will have to form a good basis for further learning. This is to say that it will not be a list of phrase-book expressions to be learned parrot-wise but that it will have to reflect the systematic properties of the language. Although the grammar contained in it will necessarily be a very incomplete one, it will nevertheless constitute a coherent body of rules which the learners will have to be able to use creatively in their own foreign language behaviour.

I was invited today to talk about the significance of the Threshold-Level for the early learning of modern languages. It has been my theme that the Threshold-Level could form the basis

for the definition of an objective for the early teaching of modern languages. In other words, the objective of foreign language teaching in primary education could form a point of articulation in a syllabus which would have the Threshold-Level as its minimum final objective. Determining this point of articulation would be a very similar undertaking to one which is in progress for adult education. The Threshold-Level was originally developed in the Council of Europe project called 'Systems Development for Modern Language Learning by Adults'. At the request of representatives of school-education in various countries a version of the same objective was subsequently made for the schools. This version, exemplified for English, will be generally distributed in the autumn of this year. Then, because it would take most adult learners two to three years to reach Threshold-Level, the construction of a short-term intermediate objective was taken in hand. This objective will be available early next year in an English version under the name of 'Waystage'. Other language versions will be prepared subsequently. What I have, in fact, proposed today is that the same procedure should be followed to determine an objective for foreign language learning in primary schools. If successful, this would constitute a new element in the European system of objectives which is gradually developed to encompass all foreign language learning activities whether in the field of adult education or of school-education. It is not our contention that children should be dealt with as if they were adults, but they might at least be treated as human beings. All human beings use language to communicate. Communication is doing certain specifiable things. Is it surprising, then, that most of these things should turn out to be fundamentally the same, whether done by children or by adults?

It is more and more generally recognized that education is an ongoing process, that, after all, it is not restricted to the ten years normally set aside for it. If the concept of permanent education is to be translated into actual learning-facilities it is imperative that we should bring together the various educational resources into one single system. The recognition of common, though

flexible objectives is a first step towards this systematization. If this recognition can be achieved on an international scale we shall be able to draw upon a multitude of intellectual and material resources such as is unavailable to each country separately. Through the Council of Europe project which has produced the Threshold-Level considerable progress has already been made in this direction. For the first time versions of one and the same common objective are being introduced in various countries both in adult education and in school education. I have tried to demonstrate today that the early teaching of modern languages has its natural place in this development.